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ABSTRACT

An interdisciplinary, core course in humanities offered at Allegheny College (Pennsylvania) approaches ethical and aesthetic issues in untraditional ways to encourage students to think more independently and articulate ideas with greater breadth. The three-term course is taught by teachers from many departments. Course sections are limited to 18 freshmen, and both the instructor and the class membership change each term so that students can be exposed to as many different ideas and opinions as possible. Focus and orientation of the curriculum also change with each term: term 1 focuses on the political and social functions of art, term 2 on great works of the Western tradition, and term 3 on the various guises of modernism. The syllabus is also keyed to cultural events taking place on campus. Problems surrounding the course are related to the structure of curriculum distribution and/or the primary function of this college as a teaching college. Criticism by many of the non-humanities faculty centers on dilettantism. Other problems stem from faculty departmentalism and academic conservatism. (LP)

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An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Humanities

Paper read to a section on Promising Trends in Undergraduate Literature Programs, sponsored by the A.D.E., at the Modern Language Association Conference, December 30, 1983

The Humanities Core Course, an experimental course for freshmen initiated at Allegheny College in 1980, evolved out of discussions among teachers in various disciplines. All of these teachers were responsible for freshman "writing sections" within their departments; and as they met to share thoughts on how better to teach writing, they were shocked to discover how ignorant they were of what was taught in one another's departments. If they all were dedicated to making good humanists of their students, they asked, why were they proceeding to do so in isolation? By jealously guarding their own departmental turf, by failing to show students what was common and central to humanistic study, weren't they encouraging students to regard narrow specialization as the norm? Weren't they contributing to the notion that humanities were irrelevant in an academic world obsessed with the vocational? Why not, they argued, devise a course that would cross conventional disciplinary boundaries and approach issues of ethics and aesthetics in untraditional ways with the intention of getting students to think more independently and articulate ideas with greater breadth?

Interdisciplinary courses have been tried at other colleges. Most visibly, Harvard began its core program in the year Allegheny did. Harvard's

requires students to select from a variety of courses, some of which are team-taught by members of different departments, but many of which are in fact old departmental offerings in new dress--history, philosophy, literature. Allegheny's is essentially different. It is one course taught over a span of three terms. It is taught in sections of no more than eighteen students by teachers from many departments, each of whom is responsible for all the material on a common syllabus. The syllabus itself provides the core--a basic anthology of works to which teachers may later refer, both within the Core Course itself and in upper level humanities courses. As one goal of the course is to expose students to teachers within different humanities departments and to different peer groups, class lists are shuffled each term. No student has the same teacher twice: he may have a German teacher for the first term, an art historian for the second, a philosopher for the third. All sections occasionally convene for group lectures or events. Furthermore, the "core" idea affords students the opportunity to discuss the problems and issues raised in class with a large number of their peers. As the N.E.H. evaluator observed at the end of the course's pilot year, it was not unusual to find Core students carrying on debates over dinner or over a beer, getting excited because Jill's teacher--a philosopher, perhaps--had approached the subject of civil disobedience differently from the way Jack's teacher--a classicist--had. Students adopt or reject the biases their own teachers may bring to material: the course encourages them to share their discoveries with one another.

This interdisciplinary scheme, of course, demands a great deal of flexibility from its teachers. The initial group of ten faculty who hammered out a syllabus in the spring of 1979 continued to meet during the summer and at weekly meetings during the year. Weekly meetings have become a tradition, a key to the course's success; for in them, teachers make a twofold commitment: first, to remain in the course for the entire year to insure continuity; and second, to learn about one another's disciplines in order to become better educated teachers. These meetings frequently have the tone of graduate seminars, in which one faculty member helps to educate others in the field of his own expertise.

One basic premise is that each of the three terms have its own focus, its own orientation; each a separate course that may draw on a previous term's work but in no sense replicate its form. We are concerned, in the first term, to have students address the question, "What are the political and social functions of art?", but to have them do so in a way that does not intimidate them or lay upon them a heavy burden of "academic profundity." For this reason, we eschew a focus on great works or the history of ideas: we want students to think about the purpose of the arts in their own lives; and if, as we often suspect, students think the arts <u>have</u> no purpose, we try to make them aware that the arts <u>could</u> enrich them. We introduce students at once to material that enrages them and brings out all their worst prejudices: contemporary painting and sculpture. Our decision to have them come to terms with works in a gallery

has proved a happy one: they're forced to confront why they like this Hopper, hate that DeKooning, detest that Stella, think this Warhol is "interesting" but wouldn't hang it in their livingrooms. They attempt to define their own tastes and discover what conditioned those tastes. And when they have done that, we ask them to do a little research on particular artists and then present their findings to the class in a three minute speech. The results are often remarkable: students begin to educate themselves, their own sensibilities, and to persuade one another that the painting they found repellent in the first week has spoken to them in the second. We continue our focus on the visual arts later in the term when we study the Holocaust. We invite students to apply Plato's strictures against art to the documentary Night and Fog and to the television drama Holocaust. In the debate waged over Holocaust between Elie Wiesel and Gerald Green in the New York Times, students learn that Plato and Aristotle still live. They look at Lena Wertmuller's film Seven Beauties and read Bruno Bettelheim's attack on it in his book Surviving. Does such a film do moral disservice to history? To what extent must art accurately reflect the truth? What are an artist's obligations to himself? his audience? Questions of whether such stuff as the Holocaust can or ought to be the subject of art prompts students to reflect, sometimes with surprising insight, on the political and social functions of art.

Just when students are thinking that the humanities can be fun after all, we hit them, in term two, with great works of the Western tradition.

Why? Because after raising issues of values and aesthetics in a general way in term one, we want students to learn how writers and artists over the centuries, or millenia, have pondered them. The danger was--and is--that the course might turn into just another history of western civilization; and in trying to avoid that, during the first year, we came up instead with a grab-bag of everybody's candidate for greatest book. Students were perfectly right to ask why the Book of Job should be followed by Augustine's Confessions, or what Greek architecture had to do with Sophoclean tragedy. Discussion of how different creative artists responded analogously to the concerns of a particular age proved too sophisticated for freshmen; and the problem of how to relate music to literature and art proved then, and remains, stubborn. The course now has been whittled and honed into something more acceptable. We focus on two concepts--classicism and romanticism--and introduce students to them through a work they enjoy, Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. The concepts, of course, are slippery; and we spend most of the term trying to undo what Pirsig has done. But they serve nicely as a frame on which to hang such diverse "classical" works as Greek sculpture and a play by Molière, or such "romantic" works as Turner's painting and Goethe's poetry. Music illustrates the two modes of thought effectively: a high point comes when students are asked to compare productions of The Magic Flute and La Bohème. The course now gives students a handle on some concepts--and works--central to the humanist tradition; but it still is attacked by some faculty not only as unhistoric, but as anti-historic. The attack has some justification; and each year we wonder whether or not students might

be better served by a course that focuses on a narrow historical period, on works to be studied as products of a particular culture and moment.

The third term is better integrated because it focuses on one concept--modernism--in its various guises. Ideas of fragmentation, dehumanization and existentialism manage to hold together such disparate figures as Brecht and Camus, Kafka and Le Corbusier, Mondrian and Picasso. Like the first, this term makes use of the media: it begins by challenging students with Bergman's film Persona and, when they least expect it, it offers them Chaplin's Modern Times as a statement about alienated man. The juxtaposition of modern figures unleashes students' energies, provokes them to apply the arts to their own lives. It culminates in a research paper for which each student selects one modern figure he finds of greatest importance to the development of humanistic endeavors.

Not least important to this process is our keying the syllabus to cultural events on the campus--to concerts, to exhibits in the gallery, to theatrical productions. We take full advantage of visiting art shows like the highly political "Art of Conscience" exhibit and of performances by visiting groups like the Eric Hawkins dance ensemble. Students attend rehearsals; when possible, they talk with performers and artists. Equally stimulating have been field trips to such places as the Cleveland Museum, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, and the Pittsburgh Public Theater for a performance of Waiting for Godot. Events like these make students aware

that the arts are available to them and encourages them to make the arts an integral part of their education, at college and later on.

In significant ways, then, the Core Course has achieved its objectives. Students are drawing correspondences among various disciplines they weren't drawing before. They are addressing questions of morality, of taste, of responsibility; they are, in proportionately greater numbers than the rest of the student body, going on to upper level courses in the humanities. The faculty, too, has benefitted. By meeting each week to discuss the progress they are making in their sections and to teach one another about their own disciplines, teachers have enjoyed a kind of intellectual renewal and a rapport, a community, rare among college faculties. This emphasis on sharing and its resultant esprit de corps have become the envy of many a disgruntled humanist.

There are problems, however. They are indigenous to the way Allegheny College and, I suspect, many other colleges are structured. And because they are indigenous, they persist. As Allegheny is a "teaching college," faculty assume that their primary responsibilities are to the classroom, and teaching loads are heavy. The Core Course, though, requires more effort than most courses do. Faculty spend summers in group meetings to rework the syllabus and learn new material; and while all this is often more stimulating and productive than even the best graduate seminar, there is little or no financial incentive or professional rewards (narrowly understood) for such work. The rewards, we tell ourselves, are intrinsic.

Some don't agree that there even are intrinsic rewards. They regard the Core Course faculty as dilettantes who take advantage of freshman naivete by dabbling in unfamiliar material, satisfied that students won't be able to tell the difference. To an extent such criticism is legitimate. What right have I, an English teacher, to teach contemporary architecture? Or an art historian to teach Hamlet? We console ourselves, however, with the conviction that students may be inspired more by a teacher who is actively engaged with new material, who is learning and synthesizing and making discoveries as he goes, than by a teacher who, like some divine eminence, imparts knowledge from a position that is lofty, secure, intransigent.

This criticism is only disguising a more deep-seated problem: that of departmentalism. Faculty, after all, are hired by departments to teach in their own field of expertise. Departments are naturally protective: if they relinquish faculty to teach in an interdisciplinary course, who will replace them and teach what they were hired to teach? Allegheny has been generous in supplying part-time help to those departments willing to invest faculty in the Core. But hiring too much part-time help raises its own ethical problems, and it hasn't fully alleviated departmental resistance to the Core Course. The dilemma of allegiance--whether to choose the Core Course over introductory departmental courses--is particularly acute for untenured faculty. It is extremely important for young faculty to be involved in such a course: they bring fresher ideas than long-entrenched

faculty do, and they help to keep perspectives current. Yet a commitment to the Core takes them out of the department that eventually will judge their competence. Furthermore, the extra demand on their time means that they will have less time to do research, less time to publish; and come tenure review, they may well be patted on the back for college service but kicked out the door.

All these problems are related to the structure of curricular distribution--how many courses must be taken for the major, the minor, or outside one's field. As a hybrid, the Core Course doesn't easily fit into the established pattern of the curriculum. If freshmen take it for the year, they satisfy their distribution requirement for the humanities. But will it, in the long run, serve them as efficiently as three introductory courses within separate humanities departments? Will the department of religion, for example, accept the Core Course in lieu of its own introductory course as a prerequisite for upper level courses? Or when a senior asks if the Core Course will fulfill the English requirement for medical school applications, can we comfortably tell that student that it will? And what does one say to the chair of philosophy, who complains, "This course may be well and good; but if freshmen take it to satisfy their distribution requirement, we'll have lower enrollments in Philosophy 1. Lower enrollments will weaken us politically as a department, will cause us to lose status, lose clout." One must understand these misgivings.

Students--despite their reservations--have enrolled in the Core Course in consistently high numbers: about 120 students each year, or 25% of the entering class, elect to take it, and very often they are among the best and most highly motivated of the class. The problem, then, is not interesting students in the course or convincing them of its value. The problem is getting enough faculty to teach it. Every year new faculty step forward tentatively, get the ear of someone who teaches the Core, and expresses interest. "I'd like to volunteer, but I'm not sure...Can my department spare me? I'd need assurances...I've heard it's a lot of work; and there's my research to do. I applaud the concept, but...." And so it will be until college faculties reconsider the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the humanities, ask themselves whether, at the freshman level, strict departmentalism can inspire students as imaginatively as interdepartmental cooperation can, and revise their attitudes accordingly. Only if faculty are willing to revise their attitudes towards interdisciplinary study will departments be willing to alter their own offerings and make necessary sacrifices. In particular they must revise the system of expectations and rewards for <u>young</u> faculty; for those young faculty ought to be in the vanguard of curricular reform, but without the academic freedom to experiment they will inevitably become tomorrow's reactionary elite, insisting that the next generation of rookies go through the same hell they did, simply because it's always been that way.